

Saturday Media Scan - Hydro Rate Reduction - June 17, 2017

From: Electronic Media <cab.amedia@ontario.ca>
To: "@OPO-Media Relations and Issues Management" <opo-mediarelationsandissuesmgmt@msgov.gov.on.ca>, "Bevan, Andrew (OPO)" <andrew.bevan@ontario.ca>, "McEachern, Gillian (OPO)" <gillian.mceachern@ontario.ca>, "Donelson, Philip (OPO)" <philip.donelson@ontario.ca>, "Bossin, Bryan (OPO)" <bryan.bossin@ontario.ca>, "Tomney, Genevieve (OPO)" <genevieve.tomney@ontario.ca>, "Jancik, Mike (OPO)" <mike.jancik@ontario.ca>, "@CAB-Trans CO" <cab-transco@msgov.gov.on.ca>, "Baker, Carys (ENERGY)" <carys.baker@ontario.ca>, "Berry, James (ENERGY)" <james.berry5@ontario.ca>, "Bodrug, Andrew (ENERGY)" <andrew.bodrug@ontario.ca>, "Campbell, David (ENERGY)" <david.campbell2@ontario.ca>, "Coker, Meaghan (ENERGY)" <meaghan.coker@ontario.ca>, "Den Heijer, Kevin (ENERGY)" <kevin.denheijer@ontario.ca>, "Esdaile, Trevor (ENERGY)" <trevor.esdaile@ontario.ca>, "Festeryga, Katherine (ENERGY)" <katherine.festeryga@ontario.ca>, "Foster, David (ENERGY)" <david.foster@ontario.ca>, "McGrath, Jessica (ENERGY)" <jessica.mcgrath@ontario.ca>, "Moseley-Williams, Kate (ENERGY)" <kate.moseley-williams@ontario.ca>, "Nekolaichuk, Colin (ENERGY)" <colin.nekolaichuk@ontario.ca>, "Olsheski, Mark (ENERGY)" <mark.olsheski@ontario.ca>, "Ramasra, Raynier (ENERGY)" <raynier.ramasra@ontario.ca>, "Ruttan, Craig (ENERGY)" <craig.ruttan@ontario.ca>, "Teliszewsky, Andrew (ENERGY)" <andrew.teliszewsky@ontario.ca>, "Thompson, Rachel (ENERGY)" <rachel.thompson@ontario.ca>, "Tresise, Landon (ENERGY)" <landon.tresise@ontario.ca>, "Tretiakov, Ilia (ENERGY)" <ilia.tretiakov@ontario.ca>, "Hansen, Alice (ENERGY)" <alice.hansen@ontario.ca>
Cc: "Sumi, Craig (CAB)" <craig.sumi@ontario.ca>, "Di Giovanni, Robert (CAB)" <robert.digiovanni@ontario.ca>, "Law, Sally (CAB)" <sally.law@ontario.ca>, "Stinson, Jeffrey (CAB)" <jeffrey.stinson@ontario.ca>, "Nutter, George (ENERGY)" <george.nutter@ontario.ca>, "Halford, Gavin (ENERGY)" <gavin.halford@ontario.ca>, "Ma, Cesue (CAB)" <cesue.ma@ontario.ca>
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MEDIA SCAN HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

June 17, 2017

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Print Coverage

Times-Journal (St.Thomas): Social services foots \$196k in utility bills; A4; 2017.06.17

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Social services foots \$196k in utility bills

Hydro rates hurt, ask any homeowner - but also ask St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services too.

The agency has been stepping up to pay utility arrears, more than \$196,000 dollarsworth in 2016 alone, as soaring rates put pressure on the low-income families they serve.

Last year, St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services helped 376 households make utility payments through its Housing Links for People program, a \$426,961 homelessness reduction initiative to keep low-income earners in the shelter they have.

The utility payments accounted for 46 per cent of the program's funds.

"Some of that hydro arrears help is for people living in social housing and some of it is for people living with private landlords too," said Elizabeth Sebestyen, acting director.

"It is a huge amount. A lot of people just can't afford it. It's a big problem."

The arrears issue isn't new for St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services. In 2015, the agency spent about \$198,000 to help 455 families cover their costs - 44 per cent of the program's budget.

But the cost of doing nothing is steep too.

Sebestyen said the utility supports help keep low-income people in their homes, one of the agency's key priorities for homelessness reduction.

"If we can help them with their hydro and keep them in their houses, that's what this program is meant to do," she said.

"It is a hardship for people." Sebestyen said one problem is some low income earners' rent is geared to their income, but their utilities are not. Steep hydro rates can put families in a tough financial position, leaving the agency or others like The Salvation Army to step in.

The agency is looking for a long-term fix for its utility help program and is hoping energy-saving investments in social housing will pay off. St. Thomas-Elgin received \$791,533 through Ontario's Social Housing Energy Efficiency Program in 2016 - funds that helped five housing providers put in energy efficient upgrades like new windows and heat pumps.

"That should really help to reduce the heating costs for people living in social housing moving forward," said Sebestyen.

Sebestyen is also looking ahead to the residential rate reduction promises made by Premier Kathleen Wynne in March. The 25 per cent break outlined in the Fair Hydro Plan could come into effect as early as this summer, with increases capped at inflation for the next four years. There is also the Ontario Electricity Support program to give low-income earners a small break on their bill.

"I'm hoping that going forward we'll see... that with all of these different programs that have been introduced recently, we should see that number, our percentage, going down," said Sebestyen. But the social service sector isn't the only one feeling the strain of steep electricity prices. PC Energy critic Todd Smith said so many other provincial ministries are paying for the Ministry of Energy's actions. "Money that's intended to go to programs within the Ministry of Education or health care or social services is being used to pay for electricity bills now," said the Prince Edward-Hastings MPP. "It's an unfortunate consequence of some really, really devastating energy policies." Smith said the government should take a serious look at the plans that lead to skyrocketing rates and address the root cause. Backing out of contentious or expensive energy contracts or renegotiating them would go a long way to drive down the price of electricity in Ontario. "There's no silver bullet that's going to fix all the mistakes the Liberals have made," he said. "When you're seeing money that is supposed to be going to provide programs like affordable housing or social housing being used to keep the lights on in our current stock of housing, it's a real shame." St. Thomas-Elgin Social Services Housing Links for People program 2016 \$426,961 total cost 46% for utility arrears (376 households) 20% for first and last month's rent (146 households) 16% for furniture costs (146 households) 11% for rent arrears (70 households) 5% for moving costs (59 households) 2% for other necessities